

Confessed killer of King dies

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Death reopens
controversy over
1968 slaying

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

James Earl Ray, 70, the imprisoned thief and drifter who confessed he fired the rifle shot that killed Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis in 1968, died yesterday.

He claimed almost to his last day his confession had been coerced and he had been framed.

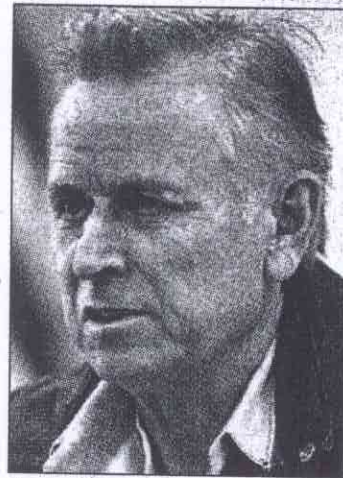
His death, after a long battle with cirrhosis of the liver caused by hepatitis that developed after he was stabbed by prisoners in 1981, left unfinished one of the most impor-

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tant chapters in modern American history.

Despite the clear and repeated denials of prosecutors, the belief that Ray did not act alone has persisted, fuelled by suspicion in some quarters that the U.S. government was somehow involved in King's murder because the civil rights leader had expressed his strong opposition to the Vietnam War and was planning to bring anti-war and civil rights forces together.

An unusual coalition of supporters gathered around Ray as he continued to press his claim. King's widow, Coretta, and his son, Dexter, embraced Ray's claim of innocence and joined in his call for a trial and new in-



JAMES EARL RAY

vestigation into the slaying.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination," Coretta King said yesterday.

Rev. Jesse Jackson, who was in Memphis when King was shot, said he is convinced Ray was involved in the killing, "but

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he was not alone. . . . The government had come to see Dr. King and his efforts as a threat to national security. . . . The government was a factor in his assassination.

"Conspirators are still on the loose," he said yesterday.

Martin Luther King Jr., in Memphis to support striking sanitation workers, was preparing to go out to dinner at the home of a local preacher on the evening of April 4, 1968, when he stood for a few seconds on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. A single rifle shot severed his spinal cord and he was pronounced dead within an hour.

The assassination of America's most prominent civil rights figure sparked riots in more than 100 cities across the United States and seemed to cut the heart from a movement that had been constructed on a non-violent struggle for equality.

Evidence and confession seemed convincing

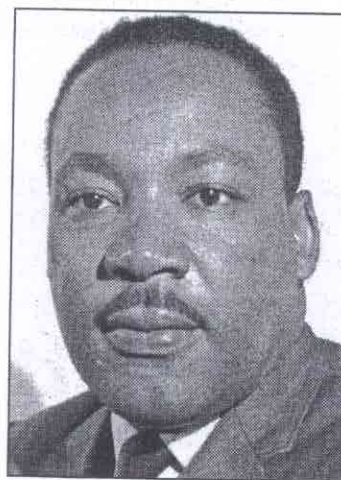
Investigators said the shot was fired from a second-floor flophouse bathroom window just off a room where Ray, who had escaped only a year earlier from a Missouri prison, was staying. Nearby they found a Remington rifle with a high-powered telescopic sight. Ray's fingerprints were found on the rifle and in the bathroom from which the shot had been fired.

Ray was tracked to Atlanta, Toronto — where he obtained a Canadian passport during a month in hiding — London, Portugal and then back to London, where he was arrested by detectives from Scotland Yard on June 8 following a bank robbery. To spare himself a trial that might have led to the death penalty, Ray pleaded guilty to the slaying. A state court judge sentenced him to 99 years.

The evidence and the confession seemed convincing. But three days after the sentencing, Ray changed his story and issued the first in a long series of requests for a trial on the charge. He planted seeds of

doubt that would blossom into a collection of conspiracy theories and a search for a mysterious man Ray had identified as Raoul.

Ray, who said he was changing a tire on his car when King was shot, claimed he had actually bought the Remington rifle in a Birmingham, Ala., sporting goods store for Raoul, the real killer. He said he had met Raoul in Montreal in 1967 and he and Raoul had engaged in

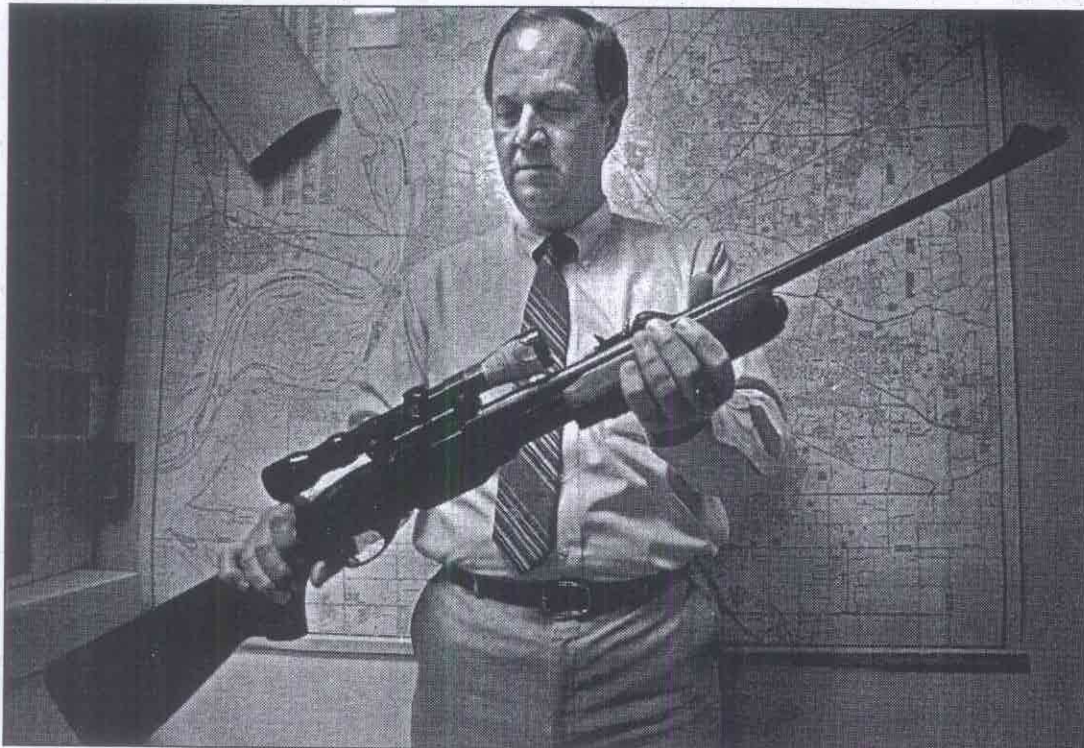


smuggling all over North America.

Based on that scenario, Ray was denied trial seven times.

Prosecutors have actually found the man named Raoul but say he is not connected to the killing. A two-year congressional investigation, the evidence from which has been sealed until 2029, concluded

JAMES EARL RAY DIES



REUTERS FILE PHOTO

RAY'S RIFLE: In 1991 photo, Ben Holley, supervisor of the property and evidence room in Memphis, Tenn., holds the rifle that James Earl Ray allegedly used to kill Martin Luther King, below.

Ray had fired the shot. But it also left open the possibility Ray was part of a conspiracy that might have involved some of his family members.

Ray was pronounced dead at Memorial Hospital in Nashville. His body was removed from the hospital shortly after he died. An autopsy is scheduled to be performed today at the Nashville medical examiner's offices.

Ray's brother Jerry said a pathologist from Pittsburgh will be on hand during the autopsy, after which the remains will be cremated and the ashes buried somewhere in Ireland, where one of their great-grandmothers was born.

He said William Pepper of London, a longtime lawyer for James Earl Ray, will organize a private memorial service, perhaps in a Nashville suburb Tuesday.

Jerry Ray said he intended to continue to fight to clear his brother's name.

Much of the interest in the Ray case can be traced to Pepper, a left-wing activist who had worked briefly with King in the 1960s but who moved later to London to practise international law.

Prosecutors say 'Raoul' is not linked to killing

In 1977, Pepper started to investigate the King slaying and three years ago published a book called *Orders to Kill*. He argued King was the victim of a plot that included organized crime, the FBI, the CIA, military intelligence and the U.S. government.

The book argued investigators never looked closely at evidence that pointed strongly at a conspiracy.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE, REUTERS